

ACTFL's Oral Proficiency Interview

—What is it and can it be effective in Japan?—

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This paper is divided into two basic parts. The first part and in fact the majority of the paper will discuss what the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is and will attempt to give the reader a solid understanding of it from a variety of perspectives. The second part of the paper discusses potential uses of the OPI and its current status here in Japan. Drawbacks are also mentioned.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) created an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) many years ago. As such, it is one of the oldest, most established and most respected means of measuring oral proficiency in existence today. This is not to say that it is flawless, but it is often the barometer by which other forms of oral examination are measured.

The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the United States Government initiated work on the OPI over thirty-five years ago. Contributions have been made over the years by The Peace Corps, Educational Testing Service (ETS), the U.S. government's Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) and ACTFL. These efforts have culminated in the OPI, along with a network of trained testers. What is particularly exciting is that the OPI is available in a variety of languages, including French, German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Chinese, and English.

I. What exactly is the OPI? It is an interview test which takes place one-on-one. It is a seemingly natural conversation between two people, yet in reality it is a highly structured test. The interviewer should be in control at all times, yet the interviewee has the right to accept or decline subjects of conversation depending upon his/her interests or personal feeling. Nevertheless, a variety of topics should be discussed to insure that the interviewee isn't a "hothouse special," able to excel in one particular area only. Therefore, this test is not particularly appropriate for students of English for Special Purposes (ESP), who may be very fluent in their field of expertise, yet unable to converse once outside of that domain.

The interview usually lasts between ten and thirty minutes. No interview should exceed thirty minutes. If it does, it is an invalid sample and can't be rated. The goal of the interview is to get a reliable sample of speech, and to establish a range of performance. The range includes the 'floor,' or the highest level of sustained performance, and the 'ceiling,' the place at which performance breaks down. One then compares this speech sample with established criteria (see Appendix A) and assigns a rating to the speaker.

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The OPI is a proficiency test, not an achievement test. Therefore, it does not matter how or where the speaker learned the language. The real issue is performance. Proficiency tests exist around us in our daily lives, for example, a driving test or a pilot's license test. They are usually criterion-referenced, rather than norm-referenced. The test takers are not compared with each other as in norm-referenced tests, but with an established set of criteria. Many achievement tests are norm-referenced. However, achievement does not always translate into proficiency, and the goal of this test is to have people meet the standards.

This point brings up a thorny issue for language testing: what are the standards and how do we set them? While a great deal of psycholinguistic research is occurring on language acquisition, as of yet no sequence in which grammatical items are acquired has been established. Sociolinguistic issues are also important yet how can they be relegated into a rating scale and on what basis?

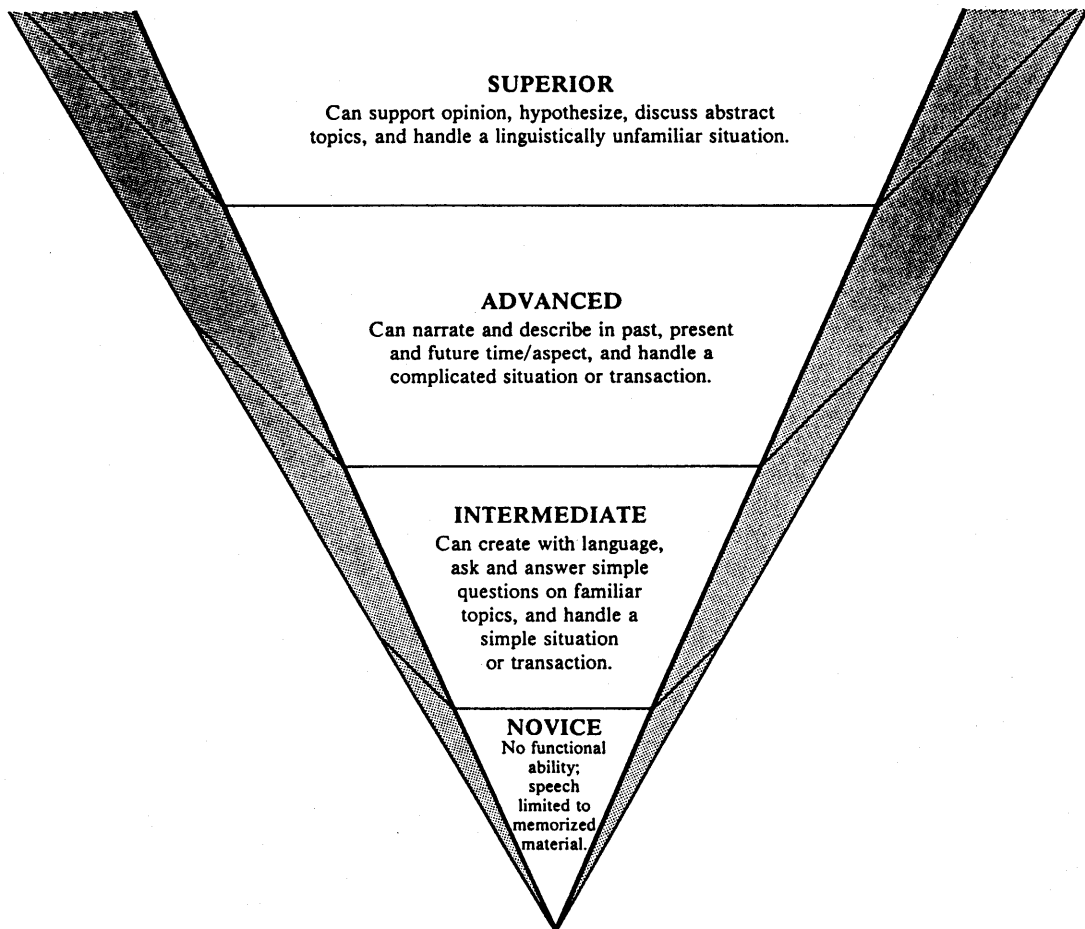
In addition, a criterion-referenced rating scale implies that an absolute scale of measurement exists, one that has true "zero" and "perfect" points.¹ As Lyle Bachman and Sandra Savignon point out, "Achieving an absolute scale of language ability is extremely difficult, since we virtually never test individuals with a complete absence of ability, and individuals in which a given ability is completely or perfectly present simply do not exist."² In the absence of complete absence or complete presence of ability, therefore, "interpretation must be made with reference to some 'norm' of ability. The problem here, of course, is that of identifying the kind of language use that we choose to adopt as the norm to be tested."³ Thus we can see that although ACTFL's OPI claims to be a criterion-referenced test, due to the lack of an absolute scale in terms of language proficiency, choices have been made in terms of establishing the criteria upon which interviewees will be evaluated.

Further discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is clear that establishing a criterion-referenced language test has inherent difficulties, and reaching a consensus among testing experts and linguists as to what the best rating scale is and what features it should encompass is a major challenge. Nevertheless, the OPI is creating a standard for evaluating oral proficiency and ACTFL's *Proficiency Guidelines* have helped to engender debate and discussion on the subject. Having guidelines, albeit imperfect, are also useful in establishing accountability in the language teaching profession, and according to Bachman, this will help strengthen the profession.⁴

The OPI is adaptive, interactive and humanistic in nature. It is adaptive because the interviewers adjust their behaviors to match the level of language presented to them. No two people should ever receive an identical test. It is interactive because, as was previously mentioned, topics are negotiated just as they would be in a natural conversation. The interviewer makes sure that a variety of topics are discussed (horizontal adjustment) and that the level of difficulty is adapted to the person being interviewed (vertical adjustment). Thus, for these reasons, the OPI is humanistic. People in general enjoy taking this test. It is personal, and resembles authentic language use.

In support of the fact that people tend to enjoy taking this test, I can relate my own personal experience. I participated in a four-day Oral Proficiency Interview Training Workshop at ALC Press in Tokyo from December 19–22, 1991, and at that time I was tested in Japanese as the seminar was being conducted concurrently in both English and Japanese. Although I had studied Japanese for approximately one-and-a-half years, I had given up studying Japanese over six months before

Figure 1.



**Inverted Pyramid Showing Major Levels
of ACTFL Rating Scale**

Source: *The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview Tester Training Manual*.

and was lacking in confidence. After taking the test I felt very good, even though my language skills had clearly broken down in certain areas. I was motivated to continue studying as a result of that experience.

The OPI is not a discrete point test, but rather a global test. The rating scale can be seen in terms of ranges. That is why, if one is an interviewer, it is essential not to compare test takers to each other, but rather to evaluate each interviewee based on the criteria established in the rating scale. In the test, the interviewer attempts to elicit speech which will show patterns of strengths and weaknesses, and which will demonstrate a consistent level of ability. It is necessary to show clearly the upper limits of that ability, or where linguistic breakdown occurs (the ceiling) so that one can be confident one is assigning the proper rating. If the test-taker does not feel at all challenged by the interview and then does not receive as high a score as he/she feels entitled to, he/

she may feel cheated or question the results. That is why it is essential for the interviewer to elicit clear linguistic breakdown as well as not to comment on the OPI or the test-taker's performance after the interview is over. (If the speaker is in the superior range, linguistic breakdown may not occur, though random errors might.)

Each interview is taped so that it can be evaluated again later, and so that another certified tester may also listen to the tape and assign a rating. The OPI strives for both test/re-test reliability as well as inter-rater reliability. Test/re-test reliability means that the same speaker, if re-tested, will receive the same rating. (If time has passed, however, and the speaker's proficiency level has changed, that of course is a different situation and one in which a new rating would be applied.) Inter-rater reliability refers to the fact that two different testers, when listening to the same interview, should give the same rating. Testers are recertified every two years to ensure inter-rater reliability and to protect the standard from drift.⁵ Becoming a certified tester requires intensive training and practice which further protects the standard.

The OPI consists of four phases: warm-up, level checks (establishing the floor), probes (finding the ceiling), and wind-down. All four phases are essential to the interview and if any phase is missing the interview is invalid. The warm-up and wind-down are particularly important for psychological or humanistic reasons as they help the test-taker feel comfortable with the process and reestablish a comfort zone at the end of the test.

During the interview, the tester is simultaneously asking questions and evaluating the speech sample received in order to keep the interview on track. One must have a sense of the level of language being produced in order to ask appropriate questions. The interviewer must be thorough and precise during the interview, being careful to elicit a ratable sample of speech. In most cases, the OPI should not take place on more than two levels of the rating scale, which consists of novice, intermediate, advanced and superior. If the interview jumps around too much it is probably an unratable sample.

If one can envision an inverted pyramid with the point at the bottom, it will be easy to visualize the rating scale (see Figure 1). At the top, or the widest point of the pyramid, is the superior level, while at the bottom, near the point, is the novice level. As one's linguistic ability improves, more and more knowledge is needed to move up to the next level. Thus, improving from a novice speaker, for example, to the intermediate level may be fairly easy, but going from an intermediate speaker to an advanced level speaker takes more time and is considerably more difficult due to the amount of language which must be grasped.

The rating scale is further broken down into sublevels as follows (note that the underlines represent major borders, whereas no underline indicates a sublevel within the same range and is a less important distinction):

<u>Superior</u>
Advanced High
<u>Advanced</u>
Intermediate High
Intermediate Mid
<u>Intermediate Low</u>
Novice High

Novice Mid

Novice Low

As we can see, crossing a major threshold is an important achievement in terms of linguistic accomplishment.

As has already been mentioned, language production is measured holistically rather than focusing on discrete points of the language. In determining a rating, four main features or categories of assessment are considered. These are 1) global tasks or functions performed with the language; 2) sociolinguistic competence; 3) accuracy based upon the content and context of the situation; and 4) text type (individual words and phrases versus paragraph level discourse).⁶ Each OPI above the novice level contains a role-play (in the superior range the role play is optional) and this usually provides an opportunity to explore a different social situation. The role play often offers a great deal of insight about the speaker and gives him/her a chance to demonstrate linguistic skills in a new way, sometimes by resolving a challenging difficulty. (For a sample of an OPI interview, see Appendix B.)

II. Can the OPI be effective in Japan and if so, how? Given the Ministry of Education's current push toward communicative language teaching in Japan, the OPI could become a very effective tool for measuring improvement in this area. The OPI is flexible and can be used for diagnostic, placement, evaluation and research purposes.⁷ It is currently in use in the United States and other countries by government agencies, academic institutions, and private businesses. Because it deals with ranges and establishes a sustained level of speech over a variety of topics, it is designed to *"predict the level of consistent functional ability in other real-life situations."*⁸ This is particularly appropriate in Japan where in the past emphasis has been placed on learning grammar and on performance on tests such as TOEIC, STEP, and TOEFL.

This is not to say that the above mentioned tests are invalid or unimportant; however, they do not measure speaking ability. Therefore, perhaps requiring scores on two types of tests—a receptive skills test such as TOEIC, for example, and a productive skills test such as the OPI—might serve to provide businesses, governmental agencies, and academic institutions with a more well-rounded view of the overall skills of their employees or students.

One of the drawbacks of the OPI is that it is particularly time and labor intensive, so applications of the OPI on a grand scale may be limited in terms of large numbers of speakers. At this time there are very few certified OPI testers of English here in Japan, although there are some. ALC Press, located in Tokyo, offers OPI Training Workshops twice per year, usually in June and December, so it is possible to receive training in Japan. However, once the seminar is over, proceeding on to become a certified tester requires time, energy and dedication. It is a catch-22, because until there are more certified testers in Japan the test will not be utilized more, and until more people recognize the value of the test and take advantage of it, there won't be a demand for more testers. Nevertheless, the OPI is a valid instrument both for testing and for learning about oral proficiency tests and being able to make critical assessments of other oral tests in existence or being created. Moreover, attending the four-day workshop can help increase awareness of one's teaching behaviors and highlight the differences between testing and teaching.

With Japan's economic might and presence in the international marketplace and global economy, it is particularly important for Japanese speakers to be able to communicate with others.

This involves knowledge not only of language but also of culture and cultural norms. As English is a world language, it is used in a variety of situations and countries involving both native and non-native speakers of English from diverse backgrounds. This poses some interesting issues especially regarding cultural values: how will communication take place and what will be appropriate conduct? Even among speakers of the same language communication can break down, as Ilka Chase points out: "The fact that nearly everyone in the public services in India speaks English should not delude the visitor into thinking that means he can communicate. They speak the language but somewhere along the line the meaning slips a cog, our ears are frequently unaccustomed to the accent, and the result can be unexpected."⁹

When attempting to communicate in intercultural situations, it is often difficult to put one's finger on exactly where or why the breakdown occurred. Many people who have lived in or traveled to foreign countries can probably relate to Lewis Carroll's Alice as she travels in Wonderland: "Dear, dear! How queer everything is today! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, 'Who in the world am I?' Ah than's the great puzzle!"¹⁰ And, one might add, how can we relate to others and be understood?

In spite of the challenges we face as intercultural communication becomes more and more commonplace, raising sensitivity to other cultures and cultural values without denying one's own are steps toward a peaceful world where diversity is respected yet communication can occur. Learning another language is a good place to begin. Even though knowledge of a language cannot guarantee that communication will take place, it does increase one's chances. Therefore, Japan's Ministry of Education's emphasis on improving communicative ability in English here in Japan is a step in the right direction. In this regard ACTFL's OPI is capable of playing a positive role and hopefully will be utilized.

Appendix A

Proficiency Guidelines

Generic Descriptions-Speaking

Novice	The Novice level is characterized by the ability to communicate minimally with learned material.
Novice-Low	Oral production consists of isolated words and perhaps a few high-frequency phrases. Essentially no functional communicative ability.
Novice-Mid	Oral production continues to consist of isolated words and learned phrases within very predictable areas of need, although quantity is increased. Vocabulary is sufficient only for handling simple, elementary needs and expressing basic courtesies. Utterances rarely consist of more than two or three words and show frequent long pauses and repetition of interlocutor's words. Speaker may have some difficulty producing even the simplest utterances. Some Novice-Mid speakers will be understood only with great difficulty.
Novice-High	Able to satisfy partially the requirements of basic communicative exchanges by relying heavily on learned utterances but occasionally expanding these through

Appendix A Continued

Proficiency Guidelines

simple recombinations of their elements. Can ask questions or make statements involving learned material. Shows signs of spontaneity although this falls short of real autonomy of expression. Speech continues to consist of learned utterances rather than of personalized, situationally adapted ones. Vocabulary centers on areas such as basic objects, places, and most common kinship terms. Pronunciation may still be strongly influenced by first language. Errors are frequent and, in spite of repetition, some Novice-High speakers will have difficulty being understood even by sympathetic interlocutors.

Intermediate	<p>The Intermediate level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —create with the language by combining and recombining learned elements, though primarily in a reactive mode; —initiate, minimally sustain, and close in a simple way basic communicative tasks; and —ask and answer questions.
Intermediate-Low	<p>Able to handle successfully a limited number of interactive, task-oriented and social situations. Can ask and answer questions, initiate and respond to simple statements and maintain face-to-face conversation, although in a highly restricted manner and with much linguistic inaccuracy. Within these limitations, can perform such tasks as introducing self, ordering a meal, asking directions, and making purchases. Vocabulary is adequate to express only the most elementary needs. Strong interference from native language may occur. Misunderstandings frequently arise, but with repetition, the Intermediate-Low speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.</p>
Intermediate-Mid	<p>Able to handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated, basic and communicative tasks and social situations. Can talk simply about self and family members. Can ask and answer questions and participate in simple conversations on topics beyond the most immediate needs; e.g., personal history and leisure time activities. Utterance length increases slightly, but speech may continue to be characterized by frequent long pauses, since the smooth incorporation of even basic conversational strategies is often hindered as the speaker struggles to create appropriate language forms. Pronunciation may continue to be strongly influenced by first language and fluency may still be strained. Although misunderstandings still arise, the Intermediate-Mid speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.</p>
Intermediate-High	<p>Able to handle successfully most uncomplicated communicative tasks and social situations. Can initiate, sustain, and close a general conversation with a number of strategies appropriate to a range of circumstances and topics, but errors are evident. Limited vocabulary still necessitates hesitation and may bring about slightly unexpected circumlocution. There is emerging evidence of connected discourse, particularly for simple narration and/or description. The Intermediate-High speaker can generally be understood even by interlocutors not accustomed to dealing with speakers at this level, but repetition may still be required.</p>
Advanced	<p>The Advanced level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —converse in a clearly participatory fashion; —initiate, sustain, and bring to closure a wide variety of communicative tasks, including those that require an increased ability to convey meaning with diverse language strategies due to a complication or an unforeseen turn of events; —satisfy the requirements of school and work situations; and —narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse.

Appendix A Continued

Proficiency Guidelines	
Advanced	Able to satisfy the requirements of everyday situations and routine school and work requirements. Can handle with confidence but not with facility complicated tasks and social situations, such as elaborating, complaining, and apologizing. Can narrate and describe with some details, linking sentences together smoothly. Can communicate facts and talk casually about topics of current public and personal interest, using general vocabulary. Shortcomings can often be smoothed over by communicative strategies, such as pause fillers, stalling devices, and different rates of speech. Circumlocution which arises from vocabulary or syntactic limitations very often is quite successful, though some groping for words may still be evident. The Advanced level speaker can be understood without difficulty by native interlocutors.
Advanced-Plus	Able to satisfy the requirements of a broad variety of everyday, school, and work situations. Can discuss concrete topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence. There is emerging evidence of ability to support opinions, explain in detail, and hypothesize. The Advanced-Plus speaker often shows a well developed ability to compensate for an imperfect grasp of some forms with confident use of communicative strategies, such as paraphrasing and circumlocution. Differentiated vocabulary and intonation are effectively used to communicate fine shades of meaning. The Advanced-Plus speaker often shows remarkable fluency and ease of speech but under the demands of Superior-level, complex tasks, language may break down or prove inadequate.
Superior	The Superior level is characterized by the speaker's ability to: —participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics; and —support opinions and hypothesize using native-like discourse strategies.
Superior	Able to speak the language with sufficient accuracy to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics. Can discuss special fields of competence and interest with ease. Can support opinions and hypothesize, but may not be able to tailor language to audience or discuss in depth highly abstract or unfamiliar topics. Usually the Superior level speaker is only partially familiar with regional or other dialectical variants. The Superior level speaker commands a wide variety of interactive strategies and shows good awareness of discourse strategies. The latter involves the ability to distinguish main ideas from supporting information through syntactic, lexical and suprasegmental features (pitch, stress, intonation). Sporadic errors may occur, particularly in low-frequency structures and some complex high-frequency structures more common to formal writing, but no patterns of error are evident. Errors do not disturb the native speaker or interfere with communication.

Source: *The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview Tester Training Manual.*

Appendix B. An OPI Speech Sample

I=interviewer

N=first initial of person being interviewed

I=Good morning, N.

N=Good morning, I.

I=How are you today ?

N=Fine, thank you.

I=Thank you very much for coming.

N=Yes.

I=OK, can you, let's see, tell me, have you finished most of your exams ?

N=Yes, um, about the exam ? (pause) OK. so.

I=Have you finished all of yours or do you have—

N=No, not all. So, two more exams left.

I=It's a difficult time, isn't it ?

N=Yes, but I must write paper end of this month so for me a paper is more difficult than exam.

I=Is your paper in English or in Japanese ?

N=In Japanese.

I=But it's still difficult. Writing is difficult. Well, tell me, N., how do you usually spend your day ? Tell me about your day.

N=Day. So, usual day ?

I=Yeah.

N=After school, after school, so two days a week I have a part-time job, and other day, mm, usually ... so recently after school I study at library. And I go back home and mm, I read books or I watch news or I call my friend. Yeah. But not special, nothing special, but so sometime really dull so I'm sick of that. So sometimes for a change, I go to Tokyo or I go to Makuhari. So recently Makuhari is changing, so I like to walk so I go to World Business Garden and I watch around.

I=So you walk around and what do you do ?

N=(laughs) So just watching _____ and I feel good.

I=When you're watching, what do you look at ? What do you notice ?

N=Oh, so I think, I like people watching, you know. So really different between people in Makuhari and Chiba or—

I=Really ?

N=Yeah. So in Chiba, or Chiba in Makuhari many people so wear like suit so kind of a businessman or businesswoman or good wear, not jeans or sneaker or shirt. Most people wear suit. So sometimes when I walked around I wear jeans and sneaker and I have a day pack, so sometime people are wondering about me.

I=That's interesting. I like people watching too.

N=Yeah, really interesting.

I=So how about on Saturday and Sunday, when you have more free time, when you're not coming to school, what do you do on your days off ?

N=So I have no school on Saturday and Sunday. So most Saturday go out and Sunday I'm sleeping. Yeah. But on Saturday I go watch the movie or I go to walk around Tokyo, a little bit far away.

I=What part of Tokyo do you like to go walk around in ?

N=Uh, I like Yurakucho or Kanda.

I=Why do you like it there ?

N=Mm, because Yurakucho is a mm, Yurakucho ... So when I walk around Yurakucho I feel little adult, you know. Because many things are expensive in Yurakucho, but I don't buy it or I don't eat there but when I walked around I feel so adult so ... and a little bit I become rich, rich lady. And in Kanda, there are a lot of old book shop, used book shop, so I watched many books. Sometime I buy a lot of books but there are many books that I don't read yet at home. Yeah.

I=I like to collect books too and it's hard to read them all.

N=Yeah.

I=Um, so do you have any hobbies, N., that you like to do ?

N=I like, I like, I like to call, call, phone call, and watching movie, listening to music, and I like theater and musical, and I like watch street performance. So sometime I go to Shinjuku so on Sunday Yurakucho have a (*Japanese*) you know? Some street shut down to cars so some people street performance at street in Yurakucho or Ginza so I like to watch them.

I=That sounds very interesting.

N=Yeah.

I=Yeah. Great. Well, N., tell me, um, have you ever traveled abroad?

N=Yes. I have been to Southeast Asia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia.

I=When did you go?

N=When I was high school student, second year's high school student.

I=Tell me about your trip. Who did you go with and why did you go?

N=Chiba Prefecture gathered student and so each high school each student, one student. So that time one hundred students went there so two teams, so one fifty student and fifty student. And so Chiba Prefecture paid for us so really cheap. But just ten days trip so it was difficult to understand each countries. But I could um, I could go to a high school there and I could talk to a student at there so Indonesians high school students and Singapore's and Thailand's. So very good experience.

I=When you spoke to the students what language did you use?

N=In English. Yeah. So in Singapore they speak English really fluently so... But in Thailand they spoke English as well as us, Japanese student, so really interesting.

I=Yeah. What did you find to be a most interesting or memorable experience? Can you tell me about something that really struck you?

N=In Indonesia, _____ big Buddhist statue, sorry I can't explain. So really big wide plain and big Buddhist _____ so that statue means peoples, um, really difficult, sorry. Kind of Buddhism or something. So um, and I feel human, human is really small and nature is great. Yeah, I felt. So human is small and weak I felt nature is great.

I=Wow. Did anything kind of funny happen to you on that trip?

N=Uh, yes, so before trip our teachers or instructors said to me so don't drink water because drink is not safe for Japanese. So I knew that so I always be careful don't drink water and in Indonesia I went to a high school and one Indonesian girl, so I made a friend, one Indonesian girl, and she said to me, "Are you thirsty?" and I said, "Yes." It was true, I was thirsty, so yes so she said go to cafeteria. And we went to the cafeteria and she bought orange juice. That orange juice is really terrible. Not cafeteria for me, just tent and kind of a big... what? not bottle, buckets... What do you say that? Big like a goldfish's box. Can you guess? Yeah, so just big box and filled orange juice but I think not clean and people take glass and what's... you know glass in the box and you know. So too terrible but she brought for me so I couldn't say I don't want to drink so I drank that orange juice but I thought how too bad to my stomach, for my stomach. And after that I told my Japanese friends or Japanese teacher so they said they can't help it so I took medicine soon as soon as I can. But nothing happened for my stomach. Yeah.

I=That's good. So you were OK?

N=Yes.

(This is not the full interview but is about two thirds of it. At this point the interviewer asks to do a role play. This speaker was given an unofficial rating of Intermediate Mid.)

Source: *Susan Miller's tape archives.*

Notes

1. Lyle F. Bachman and Sandra J. Savignon, "The Evaluation of Communicative Language Proficiency: A Critique of the ACTFL Oral Interview," *The Modern Language Journal*, 70, iv, 1986, p. 382.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 383.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 380.
5. Kathryn Buck ed., *The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview Tester Training Manual*, The American Council

on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1989, p. I-4.

6. *Ibid.*, p. I-1.
7. *Ibid.*, p. I-4.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Tarcher, J. P. *Travel Diary*, Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, Inc. 1983, pp. 64-65.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

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